Anniversary Edition
Sustainable Society
University of Groningen
University of Groningen, firmly embedded in society for the past 400 years
Since its foundation in 1614, the university has felt strongly connected to the region. In this Anniversary year the university placed the call for: “400 days for 400 questions”. This yielded a large number of diverse and interesting questions. In this Anniversary edition, the spearhead Sustainable Society will be used to answer a number of these questions of a strong social nature. The questions are always answered by two disciplines, so as to shed light on different perspectives of the topic and to share the wealth of science. In addition, we will place a number of subjects in the light of science and society.

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Outside the Academy building the flags of the provinces of Groningen, Friesland and Drenthe fly side by side. This may seem natural, but it isn’t. They have really not been flying there that long, taking into account the university’s age. They symbolise the social embedment of the RUG. Though students and researchers from all over the world find their way to our university, do not underestimate the regional embedment either.

The choice for Sustainable Society as a spearhead has not provided the RUG with an easy task. That exhaustion of natural resources must stop and that we must produce sustainably has become a widely supported theme by now. But the term ‘sustainable society’ is not part of the general public’s mindset yet.

Yet the imbalance in society requires thorough scientific insight. How to set up the labour market and remuneration systems in such a way that we do not write off the elderly before their time and how to smoothly bridge the gap between learning and working? How to secure social cohesion in a society with such great differences in wealth, cultural background and age? How to promote social skills in a world in which the public space, old and new media seem to form a reality? And which government interventions actually contribute to a balanced society and which do not?

A university-wide research agenda bundles the expertise that the RUG has to offer. This not only stimulates the researchers to make their contribution, but also provides the RUG with its profile towards Brussels, The Hague and within the region. Because the efforts in Europe are not geared towards providing an impulse to economic growth sustainably for nothing, but also towards a society that needs to acquire more balance.

With the choice for the spearhead Sustainable Society the RUG takes a stand: for science in society. And then the anniversary is not celebrated because of one’s age, but because of one’s lust for life!

Jacques Wallage

Former mayor of Groningen, extraordinary professor at the RUG and chairman of the Board of Governors
“Why do certain groups of people these days think that society has become more aggressive and which groups are these?”

Question sent in by Emmy Hartog, age 17 from Groningen

“How do the Internet we see violence every day”

When we ask this question we must first wonder: has society really become more aggressive? Indications for an increase in violent crimes should be examined by looking at the number of police reports. Or by interviewing people with victim questionnaires. But the point is that people feel society is becoming more aggressive, whether this is factually true or not. One can see that this mainly concerns fear in the public domain: aggression on the football field, in traffic, youths making people feel unsafe through loitering in shopping precincts or playgrounds.

Dijkstra points out that these days we are exposed more to stories and especially images of aggressive behaviour. Where we used to be dependent on the newspaper and could watch Opsporing Verzocht (Dutch version of Crimewatch) from 1975, one can now be confronted with photos, videos and stories of violence on the Internet continuously. Think of the images of the assault by the ‘Eindhoven head-kickers’, which were shown again and again and discussed everywhere. It is then placed under a magnifying glass, because it is nothing more than a hot item to the media. This may confirm people’s feelings that there is more aggression and that everything was better in the olden days. It is, however, of all times and we proceed to the order of the day once everything has been discussed to death.

Jan Kornelis Dijkstra is senior lecturer of Sociology at the faculty for Behavioural and Social Sciences
“A toddler is most aggressive”

It is a misconception to think that society has become more aggressive. If you look at statistics from the World Health Organisation and governmental bodies for instance, says Sietse de Boer, there is a decrease in excessive aggression and violent crimes. So there is a twisted image of reality, in which the media play a leading role by focussing on aggression and violence.

The recently released game Grand Theft Auto V sold around 13 million copies within 24 hours, a record for a game that is based on aggression and violence. De Boer points out that biologically speaking, aggression can be extremely functional in every organism, but that it is linked to all kinds of inhibitions at the same time to prevent all its adverse results. The changeability of the brain mechanisms that control aggression, cause aggressive behaviour not to be unchangeable during one’s life; people are at their most aggressive at age 2, after which upbringing and society make sure that we learn how to behave within the boundaries of social standards and values.

In our society, in reality it is only a small group of people (2-5%) that displays excessive aggressive behaviour. But they do form a large problem to the whole of society thus making violent aggression a high impact, but low frequency behaviour. From the point of view of biology too, there is still no proof of any increase in aggression; neither in our genes, nor in the structural and functional characteristics of the brain structures that control this behaviour.

Sietse de Boer is senior lecturer Behavioural physiology at the faculty for Mathematics and Natural Sciences.
“Religion connects”

“People have a need to belong to a group, but also not to die” says Erin Wilson, director of the Centre for Religion, Conflict and the Public Domain. “We want to be part of something that survives our lives, something that religion can provide”. From ancient cave drawings we can conclude that religion, or the belief in a higher power, has always played a role for humans. We are naturally curious and we continuously ask questions that are not easy to answer. Wilson: “After the Enlightenment, people became more sceptical towards religion, because science was considered better to answer our questions”. These days we see a new kind of scepticism, but this time towards science. Wilson names as an example the hot topic of climate science.

Religion is currently labelled as a dividing power that only causes problems, Wilson remarks. While large religions such as Christianity or Islam are growing at a global level, the church in the Netherlands is declining every year. “For the church as an institution, this is an essential problem, but the focus on decline should not be the only thing that occupies the Dutch church”. Wilson poses that the church is regaining its religious perspective and is looking for social issues in which it can play a part. Religion as an instrument to connect people, by offering help where needed and justice where possible.

Though the greater part of Dutch society does not go to church, this does not mean that we do not have an understanding of a higher power these days, or that we are not spiritual in any other way. We may need to adjust our image of religion in the future, by wondering what religion is about and how it can contribute to solving current issues. Even if it is a small contribution.

Erin Wilson is Director of the Centre for Religion, Conflict and the Public Domain at the faculty for Theology and Religious Studies.
Religion in society

“From church service to mindfulness”

The Groninger Studentenplatform voor levensbeschouwing (GSp, student’s platform for religion and philosophy) offers a place to study traditional religions as well as newer forms of spirituality to the students of Groningen. GSp started in 1977 as Pastoral care for Groningen Students, but six years ago the P was changed to platform. We do not have members, in order to secure an open character, free from obligations. Still many people at GSp have a Christian background: “Mostly people who were raised in the Christian tradition, but want to look beyond the Bible”, van der Veer explains. “The Sunday services that GSp organises in the Martini church mainly attract former students who were active 15 years ago, but clearly less current students”.

The decline of the church in the Netherlands is now becoming visible here on a smaller scale. “I think that religious experience was livelier then than it is now. People do not link themselves to a group of people or an institution as quickly. Being spiritual without obligations is more popular”. The contrast between old and new becomes visible during the mindfulness courses that GSp organises. “These are almost always full and draw a new audience from outside the familiar GSp circle”. In addition, the lectures are also popular.

The connecting capacities of religion seem to fade to the background, something GSp is also noticing. Though the courses attract many participants, these are separate activities where not as much social cohesion is created compared to churchgoers in the past. Philosophy offers a little wider framework than religion, but it is still unclear how this framework can facilitate this connecting role. Van der Veer: “There is clearly still a need for reflection, but with the new forms of religion this group sense still seems to be lacking”.

Christine van der Veer is external member of the Board at GSp
“There is no such thing as a bit sustainable”

“No, that is not possible. There are still so many things that we must research before we can determine how we can make our society more sustainable and how we treat nature in a more sustainable fashion. We are not there yet by a long shot. Species are still becoming extinct, agriculture is still producing manure surpluses and a lot of pesticide is still being used, and not enough energy is generated sustainably. And where social sustainability is concerned: people are not becoming any more tolerant either. So we apparently still don’t know how to make multicultural society work permanently either.

There are also still quite some issues in the area of spatial planning: cities keep on growing, while rural areas are depopulating and crumbling economically. We will have to think of a way to deal with these areas in the future, how to keep them liveable and full of diversity keeping sustainability in mind. That is one of the things we will be studying within the theme “Sustainable Landscapes”. A landscape is the spatial result of the still uncharted interaction between nature and society. A “sustainable landscape” implies sustainability on the economical, social and ecological front. Therefore, more awareness of the qualities of a landscape is important: after all, you are careful with what you cherish.

Focal point of our study into sustainable use of the living environment is the term adaptability. Of which patterns in the behaviour of man and animal can it be said that they contribute to sustainable cohabitation and preservation of biodiversity? Once you know this, you can set up landscapes, cities and residential areas in such a way that the desired behaviour develops. What you get are landscapes that are able to deal with fast physical and social changes.

How many percent sustainable are we currently? That cannot be said. There is no such thing as a bit sustainable, as there is no being a bit pregnant either.”

Han Olff is professor of Ecology, director of CEES, the Centre for Ecological and Evolutionary Studies at the faculty for Mathematics and Natural Sciences
“Sustainable behaviour makes people feel good”

“I think so. Where technology is concerned, a lot is already possible. However, you won’t make it with technology alone. For change you also need man. Human behaviour contributes to the creation of many problems, but it is also the key to solving them. Research has shown that the willingness of people to make ecologically and socially-responsible choices is often much larger than is assumed. So it is unfair that policy makers are so hesitant to encourage citizens to adjust their behaviour on moral grounds. Currently, environmental friendliness is mainly stimulated by making certain sustainable alternatives are fun and profitable. But that will not achieve the change in mindset that is needed to arrive at a truly sustainable society.

Different studies have shown that many people do not mind if sustainable behaviour requires more effort from them at times. After all, our sense of happiness is increased when we do something that makes sense or is special, socially speaking. This could be: doing something for someone else, but also contributing to a better world by, for instance, purchasing solar panels or buying organic products. This kind of behaviour not only provides satisfaction, but could also increase one’s status. It helps to focus more on these kinds of emotions. Keeping in mind that it is still important that sustainable choices are not too expensive and unnecessarily complicated.

Nowadays, every individual in the West still pollutes too much. What would help, in addition to a normative approach of consumers, is ensuring that governments, businesses and inhabitants in developing countries in their aim for wealth, immediately choose “sustainable”. How to promote that exactly is something we don’t precisely know, because most research into conditions for sustainable change of behaviour took place in Northern-American and European societies. There is still a gap in our knowledge there.”

Linda Steg is connected to the faculty of Behavioural and Social Sciences as professor of Environmental psychology
Science, Technology and Innovation Network Groningen for Sustainability (STINGS): this is the name that RUG scientists are using to help think about the use and regulation of biotechnology in Africa. They do this at the request of the African Biosafety Network of Expertise. In a number of African countries, genetically modified crops are already permitted. In different other countries, the pros and cons are still being weighed. With Michigan State University as American partner, the RUG is performing research and organising education programmes for African students and professionals.

Joost Herman is director of the Globalisation Studies institute Groningen at the faculty of Arts

“In Europe, modern biotechnology is an extremely sensitive issue. The EU is pursuing a very restrictive policy where production and import of genetically modified food for human consumption is concerned. In Africa, this attitude is one that cannot be afforded. Millions of children go to school without any breakfast there. So innovation of agriculture is sorely needed. Also, because in many places the soil is exhausted due to overplanting and there is deforestation, desertification and excess use of pesticides. In order to have a responsible and successful introduction of gene crops, a lot of knowledge, information and discussion are necessary. Our support is mainly aimed at making African officials familiar with methods to enter into a good debate with all parties involved.”

Sjaak Swart is senior lecturer Science and Society at the faculty of Mathematics and Natural Sciences

“In relation to biotechnology and food security, there are two very important questions: what are the ecological effects and what are the health consequences, once you start sowing the fields with genetically-modified organisms? A lot is already known about this, but the question is: what is safe enough? On the other hand: (daring) to do nothing can also have enormous consequences, certainly in countries with large food shortages. In our project we look at which type of biotechnology best fits Africa. Small-scale agriculture is still the dominant system there. Possibly it will be the main traditional forms of biotechnology that will be most suitable, such as crop improvement.”
To coordinate its fundraising activities, the University of Groningen set up the Ubbo Emmius Fund (UEF) in 1996. The Fund, named after the first Rector Magnificus of our university, seeks support for special research and education projects. The UEF is a recognised charity. This means that 100% of any donation goes towards projects selected by the donors.

Ismi Moualhi is project employee of the Ubbo Emmius Fund

“I was invited by Michigan State University to stay for a period of six months in the United States in the year 2013, to organise courses about sustainable agriculture. The reason for this was my involvement in 2012 with the organisation of a Summer Academy in Groningen for civil servants, lawyers, journalists and NGO-employees from twelve countries in Africa. With our American colleagues, I developed seven courses. Like before in Groningen, there was a lot of attention for the social aspects of the introduction of new techniques. One could say that the communication surrounding the use of genetically modified organisms has failed here in Europe. Fear has gained the upper hand, freezing up any debate.”

Fred de Graaf is former chairman of the Dutch Upper Chamber of Parliament and leads the RUG-Alumni circle East-Netherlands

“Our Alumni circle has 35 members. Our objective is to raise money for university research. Now that academic institutions have to rely increasingly on external financing, we can make a welcome contribution by adopting a certain project. When the director of the Ubbo Emmius Fund asked us whether we would like to support talent development with regard to sustainable food provision in Africa, we did not hesitate to say yes. In the coming years, we hope to be able to raise a total amount of € 250,000. In exchange, we are regularly kept up to date of any progress. Even though gene technology is a sensitive topic, it has not stopped us. It is a technology that can help to make Africa more sustainable. And in that sense: ‘sustainability’ there, in comparison to the West, directly touches the basic needs of life.”
“How can the gap between rich and poor become smaller in the Netherlands?”

*Question sent in by J. van der Veen, community worker in Emmen*

Posing this question immediately raises two different questions for Marcel Timmer: how large is this gap? And as soon as that is answered: is this a problem? Of all countries, the Netherlands is a country that is strongly focused on equal income distribution. Within Europe, only the incomes in Sweden, Denmark and Austria are distributed somewhat more equally. Recently, however, research by the Amsterdam Institute for Labour Studies (AIAS) at the University of Amsterdam revealed that the gap between rich and poor has grown quicker over the last decades than was assumed. In 1977 the richest 10% made 5.1 times as much as the lowest 10%, in 2011 this was 8.2 times as much.

Timmer points out that in the Netherlands we often have the tendency to look at income and then forget that people also have capital, for instance their own home. According to Statistics Netherlands (CBS) the income of households is distributed very unequally: at the beginning of 2009 10% of all households owned almost 60% of the capital. Solutions to the income gap lay in the labour and housing market, among other things, matters in which The Hague does not take decisions easily. Timmer feels we should shed a wider view on the rich and poor, not forgetting the long-term vision.

*Marcel Timmer is professor of Economic Growth and Development and director of the Groningen Growth and Development Centre (GGDC) at the faculty of Economics and Business*
The welfare state that was built up after the Second World War has brought many benefits to the field of healthcare, education and housing. Poverty has been limited, but European countries have not succeeded in banishing it. With the international North-South inequality in mind, this is not such a big issue in the Netherlands, but the gap between rich and poor is increasing here. While the welfare state used to have a great deal of solidarity, with increasing taxes as a consequence, we are now in the age of the so-called participation society.

Nowadays, the greater part of society gets by quite nicely, creating different requirements and expectations with regard to state-provided facilities. Gijsbert Vonk points to the symbolism of the hard-working Dutchman on the one hand versus the lazy (being a migrant or not) benefit layabout on the other hand, which has gained popularity over the past few years. According to Vonk solidarity is under pressure; the very poor are forced to use their nest egg as a springboard with stricter conditions and fines. The question is whether this repressive reaction will benefit the gap between rich and poor. Vonk feels that a little more empathy in making state-provided facilities more widely accessible would not do any harm, but with the severe cutbacks in the programme, the government will not take this advice on board.

Gijsbert Vonk is professor of Social Security Law at the faculty of Law
Participation explained from science

The ‘all for all’ society

“Citizens who take charge of the maintenance of their local playground, or take care of the local day care facilities or electricity instead of the government. The economic advantages of such an approach are obvious. However, the transition from welfare state to participation society is not just a ‘hot’ but also a well-debated topic. Critics, for instance, speak of the ‘every man for himself’ society and fear a further individualisation as a result of this transition. An excess, which will result in the end of solidarity. But how legitimate is this fear?

My research shows that by asking people to contribute, it does reinforce the sense of community. Because individuals can use their autonomy and individual freedom in initiatives that are formed bottom-up, individuality and solidarity can go hand in hand. One’s own contribution ensures maintaining one’s individuality, but there is also a stronger connection to the collective and greater effort for this collective.

Because bottom-up created initiatives can bring together the individual and the collective, they seem excellently suited for problems where the individual and collective interests seem contradictory. It is therefore important to see what role such bottom-up initiatives can play in the sustainable approach of problems in the field of energy, the environment and healthcare. A permanent collaboration between researchers and daily practice could turn participation society into an ‘all for all’ society instead of the feared ‘every man for himself’ society.”

Lise Jans is researcher and lecturer at the faculty of Behavioural and Social Science
Participatie in society

MAAK050

“MAAK050.nl is a website with simply a map of Groningen, showing all kinds of bottom-up projects in the town. Not for professionals, but for the inhabitants. The site was aired just over nine months ago and displays a positive message to the community as a whole: look at everything that is being done! Naturally, the driving forces are the initiators themselves, the people with great passion for what they do. From running a bicycle shop (see the Goed Bezig story) to a neighbourhood vegetable garden, it’s all about individual motivation.

The bottom-up projects on the MAAK050 map are all win-win stories: first, it enables people to pursue their passion and share this with others. Secondly, the neighbourhood or immediate environment is enriched in so many ways. The added value that is created this way sometimes simply cannot be expressed in funds. Social and societal values are often invisible. Research, for instance, has shown that vegetable gardens influence people’s diets.”

Good Job

Goed Bezig (‘Good Job!’) offers on the job training places for young people who need a little extra help, for whatever reason. They can get work experience under the watchful eye of professionals, with individual and tailormade coaching. In addition to the bicycle and scooter repair shop Bikkels & Bikes in the Lewenborg quarter, there are two other projects that young people can get their teeth into.

Though the government wants to stimulate the participation society, this is not proving successful yet in practice. Grose: “Municipal bureaucracy determines exactly in what way you have to participate. People are deemed to act in a certain way, and the vulnerable are crushed by this system. They are not able to do this, not allowed to do that, fail at this and have to do that”. Grose understands that bureaucracy is what it is: bureaucracy, but “it’s not working”.

Participating is joining in, and joining in exactly what Goed Bezig is all about. In the meantime, Goed Bezig is already working on several assignments from the business community and several municipalities have found their way to Goed Bezig. As of 2014, municipalities will receive more responsibility for labour and care. In preparing for this, two municipalities from North-Holland and five from Groningen got in touch with Goed Bezig. Already this has served to initiate a transfer of knowledge.

Erwin Grose is initiator of Stichting Goed Bezig

Maartje ter Veen is the initiator of MAAK050.nl
“Identity is a personal reality”

Upon posing this question, Peter Groote remembers Queen Máxima’s words in 2007: there is no such thing as the Dutch identity. As far as Groote is concerned, this also applies to the provinces, whether they have their own language or not. A collective identity is a social construct that can always be argued, unless the determining group is so strong that there is no doubt about it. This, however, is not the case for any northern region whatsoever. Yet an identity can be a reality for the people themselves. This makes cultural differences possible, because people have their own ideas about these social constructs.

Overlapping ideas are not out of the question, but according to Groote it is wrong to tie this overlap to the administrative boundaries of provinces. It is a fact that the area of the Stellingwerven is Frisian soil, but the local dialect is Lower Saxon by nature. Culturally, the Stellingwerven could be to Leeuwarden what Leeuwarden is to The Hague. According to Groote, the idea of a provincial identity is used mainly by the media and administrators to sell their ideas to the public. It forms an apparently good story about the individuality of the autonomous area. When different areas, however, mix culturally in the long term, people have no problem in siding with the new, wider identity. Like Ajax and Feyenoord fans cheering for the Dutch team during the World Cup football.

Peter Groote is researcher and lecturer Social Geography at the faculty of Spatial Sciences
“Hundreds of years of difference”

With the idea of a merger of the northern provinces in the back of his mind, Goffe Jensma suggests a reformulation of the question: Are the differences between Frisians and people from Groningen and Drenthe experienced by themselves as such that they may cause problems upon a merger into one national region? With this Jensma indicates that there are definitely cultural differences. Though this should not be expected in Friesland and Groningen when you look at the regional landscape, there is still historical competition between them both, which can be traced back to political relations since the 17th century.

Especially people from Groningen and Frisians think about each other in terms of difference. This goes back to the times before 1800, when both areas were still sovereign districts. There have been scholars that seriously thought that people from Groningen and Frisians were from another race and had differently shaped skulls, and there were also those who thought that people from Groningen were mainly black coffee drinkers and Frisians were tea sippers. At least there is less of a language difference between people from Drenthe and Groningen, though they are not each other’s equals either. “However much most of these differences are acted out and are metaphorical, this very long history of designed difference cannot simply be erased. In the case of a merger of the Northern provinces, this theme will raise its ugly head again and influence the debate.”

Goffe Jensma is professor of Frisian language and literature at the faculty of Arts
Afterword

From failure to success

When the rector announced the theme of the newly-to be developed spearhead in 2011, it caused a lot of frowns. Sustainability – what a lame label? Totally indistinctive, because just about any university has already ‘claimed’ this theme! And sustainable society no less – what a vague and normative all-purpose word that includes so many different things! Furthermore: by far not enough ‘work-off capacity’, because it is focused too strongly on the social sciences and the humanities. Etcetera.

But right away, it seemed that not only had the right chord been hit, the idea fell on exceptionally fruitful soil. It soon became clear to the scientists who had shaped the spearhead for the past two years, that the RUG as a classic and broad university really can make a difference in this respect. And during the first interdisciplinary and interfaculty debates the outlines of an innovative long-term research agenda soon became quite apparent. Focal point is social problems as they can be generated by community failure: situations in which (parts of) a society are no longer able to create conditions which are important for their well-being through a lack of cooperation.

At least three overall issues play a part on all social levels – for instance in personal relations, in families, within and between businesses, in neighbourhoods and between states:

1. What consequences do the global transitions of the last century have for communal failure (transitional issues)?
2. What institutional frameworks are needed to realise transitions in a sustainable society (governance issues)?
3. How do information technologies and (new) media influence community failure and what role can they play in a transition to a more sustainable society (information and communication issues)?

The interdisciplinary spearhead of Sustainable Society has helped the RUG to make a good start on their contribution (with social partners) to solving these issues. Let it be a sustainable initiative.

Rafael Wittek

Professor of Theoretical Sociology and chairman of the Sustainable Society think-tank 2012-2013